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Cornell President Rawlings issues statement of 'Freedom with Responsibility'

ITHACA, N.Y. – Cornell President Hunter Rawlings today (Jan. 27, 1999) issued the following statement:

"In a vibrant academic community such as Cornell, we confront each year a number of challenging intellectual, cultural and social issues. We do so in an atmosphere of freedom characterized by open, candid and often vehement exchange of ideas. Faculty, staff and students are encouraged to express themselves on a wide variety of subjects, and as a result we have a yeasty mixture of debate and dissent that contributes to Cornell's character as a first-rate research university. This is indeed a stimulating intellectual environment for all of us and few, if any, of us would wish it otherwise.

"There are times, however, when ugly incidents mar our community and threaten the open environment that all of us require to do our best work. Several such incidents occurred last semester, and though they at first appeared random and unrelated, they developed a cumulative and oppressive weight that diminished our confidence in Cornell's community. A high proportion of those incidents were racially based; in particular, they involved racial harassment in the form of anonymous phone calls, late-night stalking and abusive epithets. Such behavior is not only offensive and threatening to individuals, but it is corrosive of community. At Cornell we have a firm commitment to racial and ethnic diversity, to multiple backgrounds and points of view, and to affirmative action as a means of achieving these ends. We continue to recruit students from minority groups, particularly underrepresented ones, because we believe they have much to offer our academic community. We believe that diversity improves education as well as society. Racially based harassment is ignorant and vile and serves to divide community rather than unify it.

"We have designed several means of combating such harassment, including safety measures such as police patrols and better lighting, educational programs and training for resident advisers, and increased means of reporting incidents to campus officials. It is especially important that individuals experiencing or witnessing racial harassment report this information promptly so that we can respond accordingly.

"It is incumbent upon all of us to promote a climate of civility, decency and respect for others on campus.

There is no place for racist attitudes in a university that espouses the enlightened use of reason to pursue humanistic understanding and scientific truth. At a time when we are celebrating the remarkable life of Dr. Martin Luther King, it is important to remember the principles he held and the example he set. His dream of racial justice is one that we should all help this university and this country to realize by our words and our actions.

"I want to mention two other instances of unacceptable behavior that also occurred last semester. One was a flyer threatening specific administrators with physical harm if they continued to espouse a position they had taken on the Latino Studies Program. That threat was a flagrant violation of the Campus Code of Conduct and of state law and an affront to Cornell's commitment to academic freedom. We shall pursue strong sanctions against the authors of this flyer if we are able to identify them, and we encourage anyone who may have information in this regard to make it known to the proper authorities. The university also suffered from two illegal actions by animal rights protesters at Comstock Hall last November: one involved attempts to forcibly enter non-public office space, and the other entailed the sealing of all the external locks on the building with glue. Even though this latter incident took place at night, the building was still occupied. Had there been a fire or some other form of untoward event in Comstock before the Cornell Police were able to have the locks unsealed and replaced, a tragedy could have resulted. I also call upon any member of this community who has knowledge about this incident to report it to the proper authorities, including the Cornell Police.

"These actions intimidated faculty and staff and damaged university facilities. They are protected by neither the First Amendment of the Constitution nor by the provisions of the Campus Code of Conduct dealing with responsible speech and expression. This university has long been tolerant of protests, but protesters must respect the right of faculty, staff and students to conduct their work free of threats and intimidation. Those who violate such rights, whether individually or as part of a group, will be sanctioned on campus and, where appropriate, prosecuted in the courts.

"Cornell correctly prides itself on a tradition of freedom, but all of us should remember that freedom, in order to flourish, entails responsibility. In his well-known 1940 address "The Cornell Tradition: Freedom and Responsibility," Professor of History Carl Becker defined the essence of Cornell's character. In commemorating the 75th anniversary of the signing of Cornell's charter, Becker said the following: 'These considerations make it seem to me appropriate, on this memorial occasion, to recall the salient qualities which have given Cornell University its peculiar character and its high distinction; and, in conclusion, to express the hope that Cornell in the future, whatever its gains, whatever its losses, may hold fast to its ancient tradition of freedom and responsibility — freedom for the scholar to perform his proper function, restrained and guided by the only thing that makes such freedom worthwhile, the scholar's intellectual integrity, the scholar's devotion to the truth of things as they are and to good will and humane dealing among men.'

"We have a responsibility to fulfill Professor Becker's hope: to make Cornell a campus where we engage serious issues with the integrity and care they deserve. Respect for others, especially those with whom we disagree, is an obligation placed upon all of us. Abusive rhetoric, race-baiting and threatening speech and behavior undermine the most important values of an academic community. Cornell stands for reasoned thought, sustained and informed discussion, constructive engagement and freedom with responsibility. Let's leave that legacy for the next generation."